

Results Innovation Lab: Transforming Children's Lives with a Wider Lens

By Charlotte Haberaecker

In America, one of the wealthiest nations on earth, millions of children do not get the tools and support they need in their early years despite their untold potential. They struggle with completing high school, and are left with their physical and mental health needs unmet. Far too many children lack a stable family or safe place to call home during early childhood – a time so critical to stability and success – and may have additional challenges tied to the juvenile justice or foster care system.

Consider that only 55 percent of America's youth in foster care graduate from high school by age 19. A significant percentage of youth aging out of foster care are instantly homeless, and just 3 percent graduate from college. Tragically, 60 percent of child sex trafficking victims have been or are in the child welfare system. Nearly 21 percent of children in the U.S. – 15 million in total – live in families with incomes below the federal poverty threshold. We also know that over 20 million children “lack access to care that meets modern pediatric standards,” and over 10 million lack primary care and vaccinations, according to a recent Children's Health Fund report. Add to these alarming statistics the additional equity-related challenges children of color often face, and it's hardly surprising that the experiences of so many of America's children are characterized by unrealized potential, lessened opportunity and, too often, incarceration.

The encouraging news, however, is real results are being seen through a new initiative we have launched through Lutheran Services in America, one we see great promise in. We believe that in the interest of children, their families, and our nation as a whole, we need to be viewing potential solutions today through an entirely different lens, one that better fits modern challenges and realities, and one that makes us better able to truly equip and prepare children to be the successful adults they have such enormous potential to become. In doing so, we have the huge opportunity to see that our efforts result in equitable outcomes for all youth and opportunities to grow to be healthy, productive adults – regardless of where they were born, their parents' income, their gender, the color of their skin, or their ZIP code.

A New Model: Results Innovation Lab

At Lutheran Services in America, we already are heading in this direction through our Results Innovation Lab, part of our ongoing Children, Youth & Families Initiative, launched in 2016. The Lab empowers providers to lead collaborative efforts with a wider variety of partners in their communities, eliminates silos too often found in standard practices of today's service systems and programs, and activates all stakeholders toward a common goal – dramatically improving the trajectory of 20,000 vulnerable children in America by 2024.

On any given day, Lutheran Services in America and our national network work with 12,000 children in foster care and over 40,000 children and families from coast to coast. Our member organizations from our national network that participate in Results Innovation Lab work to strengthen families to stay together or, if that isn't possible, help ensure children and youth are safe and connected to their communities, schools, jobs and families, and are able to lead safe, healthy and productive lives.

So what makes the Lab's approach and processes so uncommon, and why are we seeing such dramatic early progress in several states?



For starters, we recognize the inherent value of incorporating a diverse set of on-the-ground community partners, people and organizations able to see and address inherent biases in the system, who then help develop targeted strategies to achieve equitable outcomes for all youth. Keeping a broad range of leaders and stakeholders – including affected populations – deeply engaged in our Lab helps address existing barriers and seeks to avoid perpetuating the shortcomings and inequities built into the current system. By involving strategic partners ranging from school officials and health centers to police representatives and social work professionals, Lab participants from our network of member organizations have been able to more quickly see a much bigger picture when it comes to helping ensure children’s overall well-being.

There is no “quick-fix,” one-size-fits-all solution when it comes to helping children and youth in challenging circumstances reach their full potential. As such, it’s also critical in our Lab efforts to factor in key social determinants. How are poverty or transportation challenges directly affecting a child’s health, for example, and what can be done to help address those factors affecting her life? Could a social determinant like food insecurity at home or a child’s fear of his everyday surroundings be impacting his behavior in school, and how can those issues be addressed to help him? Without asking and addressing pivotal questions like these that are so tied to children’s stability and well-being, efforts to fully equip youth for future success are limited, at best.

In addition to the importance of factoring in strategic community partners and social determinants, a particularly important part of Results Innovation Lab is to fold in hard data to Lab participants’ strategies and efforts. A data-driven approach – one which carefully studies outcomes and what those outcomes tell us, then folds those learnings into efforts to help children – has translated into on-the-ground efforts that successfully reach the most vulnerable populations first. What sounds so simple can too often be overlooked, and we’ve seen firsthand that something as straightforward as incorporating data into decisions on where to start or how to best reach people most in need of support is a game changer.

Promising Results

When it comes to Results Innovation Lab progress, the proof is in the pudding. Consider these education-related examples from Lutheran Services in America’s national network of member organizations. Lutheran Social Services of Wisconsin and Upper Michigan (LSS) assembled a committee of area partners – including community organizations and leaders, schools, and healthcare organizations – achieving great success. Its new “Partners of Change Committee” is providing the opportunity for partners to work collaboratively with schools to serve an estimated 350,000 Wisconsin students. The LSS initiative also expects by September 2020 to achieve a 5 percent increase in third-grade reading proficiency levels for economically disadvantaged Hispanic and African American students, translating to over 2,000 additional Wisconsin students on track to graduate from high school. And Results Innovation Lab participants in Colorado’s Lutheran Family Services Rocky Mountains (LSSRM), in strategic partnership with foster parents and community education partners, are making significant strides toward reaching their established target to increase the percent of youth in foster care graduating with a high school diploma by increasing school placement stability for children by 15 percent.

In addition to education, stability and safety are vital for children and youth. A key part of that stability is safe housing and permanent family settings. In Minnesota, where efforts to improve access to stable housing for youth of color in Minneapolis and Duluth are underway by Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota, outcomes for over 200 youth have been improved by examining what programmatic components could be alienating youth of color in their existing homeless youth programs. And in North Carolina and South Carolina, Lutheran Services Carolinas reduced the number of times children needed to move by 10 percent, by focusing on placement stability and supporting foster family homes that youth were living in during challenging behavioral episodes.



By using real-time regional case data, Lutheran Children and Family Services of Illinois decreased the length of time children of color spent in foster care while increasing guardianship, reunification and adoption rates. Using the Results Innovation Lab model, the organization achieved a 12.6 percent increase in permanency, and an impressive 24.8 percent decrease in median length of time before children moved to a safe and permanent family home. Further, our network member Upbring in Texas, in coalition with state and local foster agencies, was responsible for 687 children being reunified with their family or adopted in Travis County, a success delivered in large part due to the organization's leadership in forming strategic partnerships that directly strengthened support for families in a culturally sensitive way.

In terms of safety and stability, juvenile justice is a front and center issue. Betty Oldenkamp, president and CEO of Lutheran Social Services of South Dakota, notes the difference Results Innovation Lab approaches and resources are making for youth in her state who are or were tied to the state's juvenile justice system. "The Lab provided the leadership capacity to bring together, for the first time, a wide-ranging group of community stakeholders. This included law enforcement, schools, court services, county representatives and other nonprofits to change the life trajectory of youth involved with the juvenile justice system," she noted. "Our Results Innovation Lab efforts meant decreasing the arrest and re-arrest rates for over 700 youth of color. The Lab's tools and methodologies continue to guide our work to strengthen families and communities."

Promising activity in additional states includes housing in Massachusetts, where active efforts are underway by our national network member Ascentria Care Alliance to expand stable housing for teen mothers and their children in an increasingly unaffordable and limited housing market. And in promising health-related progress, New York is focused on a "birth-to-three" initiative that has delivered a 20 percent increase in the number of infants and parents screened for developmental needs and risk factors at NYU Langone's Family Health Centers. The initiative also has delivered a six percent increase in vaccination rates for young children, as well as a "MyChart" Initiative that is piloting a new data-driven health screening system.

Next Steps for Results Innovation Lab

What's inspiring is that this variety of examples showing Results Innovation Lab progress already made speaks to how much more can be done in the months and years to come. Since 2016 we have worked with 18 of our network's organization members from 17 states. From now until the conclusion of Results Innovation Lab in 2024, we expect to include 32 additional member organizations from our national network from 23 additional states – for a total of 50 member organizations in 40 states.

While results are showing such promise, it's key to note that we view progress already made as an encouraging starting point. By becoming a national model – one whose more modern approach features untraditional partnerships, social determinants and vital data – Results Innovation Lab has the potential to fundamentally change the lives of exponentially more children and youth throughout America.

Imagine the number of children whose lives could be transformed through this model if applied on a national scale. Imagine if community partners and families had the tools and support they need to ensure that all children in the U.S. are nurtured, and placed on a solid path to successful adulthood. Just imagine the life-defining difference that would make.

With so many Americans in need of stability as children and success as adults, additional results cannot come a moment too soon.

To learn more about Lutheran Services in America's Results Innovation Lab, contact Sheila Weber at sweber@lutheranservices.org.